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National Council of Teachers of English
Annual Convention, November, 1969

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Panel Topic: "What is Relevant for the Middle 75%?

THE FREE CHOICE ENGLISH CURRICULUM

ED040197

What is relevant for the middle seventy-five percent?

That's a big question. And, frankly, I'd feel very presumptuous if I had a direct answer for it.

How can any one individual know what is relevant for the "middle seventy-five percent"--or the top and bottom twelve and a half percent, for that matter? In the rare moments when I have free time for reading, I am hard-pressed to know what's relevant for myself. I scan my bookshelves, trying to find a book that is relevant to my thoughts, feelings, problems and concerns of the moment. I see whole sections of unread books which I once bought because they were relevant to me at the time, but which were never opened because my concept of relevance changed over the months or years.

And now I am to decide "what is relevant for the middle seventy-five percent."

Last year, I recommended Catch-22 to one of my closest friends, a friend I've known intimately and worked closely with for many years. I had no doubt that this great modern novel would mean as much to him as it did to me. Needless to say, he gave up on it after fifty pages. "What in the world made you think I'd like that?" he asked me. "I was bored to death with it."

And now I am asked to say "what is relevant for the middle seventy-five percent."

The point I am making is that, it seems to me, we are on very dangerous ground when we propose to determine what is relevant for another human being--let alone seventy-five percent of them. Albert Camus once noted that we have had too many benevolent leaders whose only goal was the "happiness of the people," but who failed to ever go to the people directly and ask them what it would take to make them happy and the means by which they hoped to become so. Symbolically, I note that there are no students on the panel today. As long as we English teachers continue to take it solely upon ourselves to decide what is relevant for our students, I think our role is analogous to that of benevolent despots to whom Camus referred.

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Now, I don't mean to totally condemn benevolent despots. History shows us many examples of benevolent despots who have done much to advance the progress of civilization. As a matter of fact, some of my best friends are benevolent despots--some in their classrooms, some in their businesses, and some in their homes.

However, benevolent despotism does have its drawbacks, especially for curriculum builders. There are many drawbacks, but the main one I want to mention is that the benevolent despot may be wrong in his perceptions of the needs of his people, in which case he is no longer called a benevolent despot but a tyrant or a dictator or a bad guy. A critical question for English teachers is whether, over the years, our perceptions of what is relevant for our students have been right or wrong.

Speaking of English teachers collectively, I would say, up to now, we have failed abysmally in determining what is relevant for our students. How many of them read Shakespeare after completing their formal education? How many of them continue to write poetry? How many write essays and submit them to magazines? How many return to the "classics"? How many write anything more than postcards to their friends and relatives? And how many continue to present speeches in public or enter public debates and sumposiums?

On the other hand, how many become avid students of Readers' Digest or The-Book-of-the-Month-Club? And how much time do adult Americans spend watching t.v., compared to the time spent reading books?

Where have we failed? Why is it that only a small percentage of the millions of English students who have passed through our classrooms have developed the skills, attitudes and behaviors we tried to teach them?

I would say that our failure lies in our stance of benevolent despotism in creating curriculum. With the best of intentions, we have decided what our students need and what is relevant to them. But history has proved us wrong. We have incorrectly judged what is relevant for our students and have, thus, defeated our own purposes.

Which brings us to a point in history where we must decide to either ignore our own failure and proceed as usual or to acknowledge our failure and do something differently. Assuming we would do something differently, the question arises: what?

One alternative would be to have a convention and call in some "experts" to give a rescription of "what is relevant for the middle seventy-five percent." And perhaps the "experts'" perceptions will be better than those of the average English teacher. He might tell us, for example, that Richard Wright's Black Boy is more relevant than Silas Marner. Or he might say the poetry of Bob Dylan or Simon and Garfunkle is more relevant than that of Chaucer or Spenser. And he may be right.

It may be that more students enjoy Dylan than Chaucer, more students appreciate Black Boy than Silas Marner. But what about the students, and there are many, who prefer the classical to the modern? What about the students who see Silas Marner as more relevant than Black Boy? And what about the students who know of other writers who are more relevant to them than either Richard Wright or George Eliot?

We come right back to the same problem. As long as one person, be he expert or pedestrian, be he perceptive or obtuse--as long as one person or group of people determines what is relevant for another person or group of people, there is bound to be enormous inaccuracy and self-defeating results.

Clearly the only alternative which can help curriculum makers build a curriculum that is relevant to the students at which it is aimed is to meaningfully involve the students in the building of curriculum and to structure the curriculum so that as many students as possible can pursue a course of study which is, in fact, relevant to their needs.

As I see it, this can be done in one or both of two ways. It can be done by an individual teacher and his students within a given classroom, or it can be done by a whole English department within a given school. Both of these are probably essential if a curriculum is really to be relevant to any group of students. But my twenty minutes today does not allow me to deal with both of these areas. So, in the time

remaining, I should like to suggest one model for how an English department, in an average sized school, might build a curriculum which is not only relevant to the middle seventy-five percent, but the other twenty-five as well.

I will call this innovation the "free choice English curriculum" and would like to note that many schools are already trying it on an experimental basis. Two such schools are Meadowbrook Junior High School in Newton, Massachusetts and Abington High School, in Abington, Pennsylvania.

Picture Janie Smith, a tenth grade student in this innovative school. It is April, and Janie, along with her classmates, must decide the courses she is going to take the following year. In some cases, she has no choice, whereas in other areas there is limited choice and in others considerable choice. One of these areas of considerable choice is English.

Janie must choose one English course. But she may choose from among the following alternatives, described in the English Department's catalogue of course offerings. Here is a sample of some of Janie's choices:

Modern Drama

This course will explore the beginnings and the evolution of modern drama. Beginning with Ibsen's The Master Builder, the course will include Shaw's Caesar and Cleopatra and Man and Superman, Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest, Williams' Glass Menagerie, Brecht's Good Woman of Setsuan, Sartre's No Exit, Miller's Death of a Salesman, and several productions of the 1960's. What can we expect in the theatre of the 70's? This, too, will be a subject of discussion. The course will include several trips to local performances of plays.

The Classics

What are the origins of Western literature? This course will explore some of the earliest and greatest literary works of the Western world and trace their influence through the centuries. Three major areas of literature will be stressed--the literature of The Bible and Greek and Roman literature. Some of the works considered will be: Genesis, the Psalms, Matthew, the Odyssey, Plato's Apology and several of his dialogues, Antigone, Edith Hamilton's Mythology, the Aeniad, and several other works.

Utopian Thought

What is the ideal society for man? Numerous works of literature and philosophy have attempted to answer this question. This course will explore different views of societies of the future--both those offered as ideals and those offered as warnings.

These include: Plato's Republic, More's Utopia, Hilton's Lost Horizon, Skinner's Walden Two, Huxley's Brave New World, Orwell's 1984, Neill's Summerhill, and modern writings by hippies and members of present day rural communes.

Great Men and Women in Literature

What is greatness? What is courage? Different people have lived lives that have illustrated greatness and courage in different ways. This course is designed especially for those students who would like to improve their reading and writing skills, and will explore these concepts of greatness and courage through the lives of famous men and women. Readings include: Helen Keller's Story of My Life, the Autobiography of Malcolm X, Bob Feller's Fear Strikes Out, Audie Murphy's To Hell and Back, Sammy Davis, Jr.'s Yes I Can and other biographies and autobiographies of famous politicians, military figures, scientists, sports heroes, and celebrities.

Man and God in Literature

Throughout the ages, man has attempted to define his relationship to God, to the universe, to the infinite, to the unknown. He has attempted to find the meaning in life, a reason for suffering. Out of this attempt have come organized religions, personal moral philosophies, atheism, agnosticism and many other group and individual answers to metaphysical questions. This course will explore many of these answers and will use literature to illustrate alternative views. Readings are often long and difficult, so that this course is recommended only for those students who are good readers and who like to read a lot. Readings include: Oedipus Rex, the Book of Job, Ecclesiastes, the Baghavat Gita, Crime and Punishment, the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, the Plague, the Myth of Sysiphus and others.

These were only five of the courses from which Janie has to choose. At Abington High School, the list of thirty-two course offerings open to the ninth and tenth grades this year includes:

Creative Interpretation of Literature
East Meets West
Black Voices
Basic Grammar
Creative Writing
How Man Expresses Himself About War
Great Tales of the Supernatural
Mirror of the Russian Mind
Modern European Drama

Can you picture some of the books you would use in these courses? What is a course you would really like to teach? Here are some others from Abington's list:

The Nature of Poetry
Psychology and Literature
The Roaring Twenties--Views of the Lost Generation
Selected Plays of Shakespeare
Twentieth Century Literature
The Fall from Innocence
The Impact of the City on People and Literature

The list continues and gets more and more exciting, but this is a representative sample of the types of courses which might be offered as part of the free choice English curriculum. In some schools the course may run for the whole year, in others they may be semester-long.

Now, what are the advantages of this kind of curriculum structure, and what are the disadvantages?

First of all, it allows the students to decide what is relevant to them. Because the student chooses from alternatives, he makes a commitment to his choice. (The more attractive his alternatives are, the truer it is that his choice indicates a commitment.) Because of this commitment by the student, he is more motivated to work and work with interest in that course. And because most of the class has made a similar commitment, the class takes on a very special atmosphere--a group of students committed to pursuing a common learning goal.

A second major advantage is that the free choice English curriculum maximizes staff effectiveness and morale. Teachers have the opportunity to teach in the area of their special competencies and interests. They relish their subject more and this is conveyed to the students. They enjoy their work more and this creates a happier, healthier feeling within the department. Over the years, as a given teacher's interests change, he can change his courses. The system allows the teacher to grow and learn and change.

These two factors--increased student interest and motivation and increased faculty interest and competence--lead to better performance by students and teachers--the goal of any curriculum innovation.

However, all curriculum innovations have possible drawbacks, and this is no exception.

If the course offerings are designed without meaningful participation by students, they stand to be just as irrelevant as most English curricula have been up to now. The English department has the responsibility of holding meetings with students, using questionnaires, getting feedback on student reaction to present course offerings, and

in other ways involving the students, before it comes out with its catalogue of courses for a new year or new semester.

Another danger is that the sum total of course offerings will be too narrow or restricted and that many student interests will not be covered. The department must make every effort to present as broad a selection of offerings as is possible, taking into account student interest and faculty interest and competence. This might have certain implications for hiring policies. The English chairman, for example, might consciously seek new teachers who can offer new viewpoints and areas of interest and competence to the department.

Another pitfall is that student ability will not be considered as teachers propose courses which interest themselves. I'm not too worried about the students on top. There will be no problem finding teachers to offer "college level-type" courses to them. And I'm not too worried about the middle seventy-five percent, whoever they are. They will have plenty of alternatives to choose from, and because they have chosen areas of their own interest, these so-called "average" students will do surprisingly well. But I am worried about those kids we call the "slow" classes or "low-ability" groups. It would be very easy for a department to forget these students, and after almost all the course offerings have been decided, to throw these students one or two courses as a sop, as a second thought. The department chairman has a special responsibility here to coordinate the course offering decision process so that <u>all</u> the students have real choices from attractive alternatives.

Still another possible drawback is that in smaller schools, the course offerings would necessarily be more limited in number. One way to compensate for this is to inter-age classes. I taught that course in Utopian Literature to a group of eleventh and twelfth graders and found that the inter-aging actually increased the interaction. A colleague taught psychology and literature class to tenth, eleventh and twelfth graders, and it too was a success.

Then there are the problems of scheduling, student and teacher rostering, course selection, who signs up for what, proper guidance for students, and so on. I'm afraid

there are no easy answers here. But at Abington High School, where thirty-two courses were offered to 2000 ninth and tenth graders, every single student in the school was given his first, second or third choice, and every teacher was able to teach the courses he wanted. If the commitment is there, the solutions will follow.

Well, I've saved the biggest objection until last. "Do you mean to tell me a student could go through four years of high school and never read Shakespeare or Milton?" In other words, are there not certain reading experiences a student needs if he is to be considered an educated person?

My answer to that is "no." Maybe it was true at one time, but with the vast proliferation of knowledge today, I must say a person can be quite well-educated and well-rounded without Shakespeare or Milton. And I'm a Shakespeare fan myself. The problem is that as soon as we begin to prescribe what a student needs, we never know where to draw the line. I say Shakespeare, you say Milton, you say the Odyssey, you say the Bible, you say John Donne, and you say Richard Wright and you say Jean Paul Sartre and you see what we're doing--coming back to the same highly structured curriculum which we have had for years and which is no longer working.

As far as specific content goes, I no longer feel comfortable prescribing certain "musts" for students. As far as skills go, that's another story. As English teachers, we still have the responsibility of teaching our students to effectively communicate with the English language, which means effective reading ability and the skill of literary analysis, clear and cogent writing skills, the ability to listen and hear another person's views and feelings and the skill of verbally communicating one's own ideas. This has not changed, and these skills can all be taught in the context of any course within the free choice English curriculum.

Certainly there are other drawbacks and other advantages of the curriculum design I have outlined this afternoon. To the limited extent that I have seen it used, it has offered exciting results for English teachers and English students. If we would be relevant to all our students, we can no longer take the stance of benevolent despotism.

We must involve the students in the building of curriculum and offer them a structure under which they can choose the course of study that is, in fact, relevant to their needs.

The End